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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, PM, PM/HDP

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREL PGOV HAID KHDP CE LTTE

SUBJECT: U.S.-sponsored humanitarian demining training program kicks off at military base in south

Refs: (A) Colombo-PM/HDP 08/25/03 class e-mail
- (B) Colombo 1430, and previous

¶11. (U) This message is Sensitive but Unclassified --
Please handle accordingly.

¶12. (U) SUMMARY: A major State Department-sponsored humanitarian demining training program for the Sri Lankan (SLA) Army has kicked off at a base in the south. The project, which has already received upbeat press coverage, serves to reinforce strong U.S. support for Sri Lanka's peace process. END SUMMARY.

¶13. (U) A State Department-sponsored humanitarian demining training program for the Sri Lanka Army (SLA) kicked off on August 25. The training program, which is budgeted at USD 2.2 million, is taking place at a base for SLA engineers located in Embilipitiya, a town in southern Sri Lanka. The program, conducted by the RONCO Corporation, will train SLA officers and enlisted personnel in internationally accepted humanitarian demining methods. Designed to contain both training and operational elements, the program is scheduled to take place from late August 2003 through February 2004. The program is set to train approximately two hundred SLA personnel, who will utilize their new skills in government-sponsored demining and unexploded ordnance (UXO) removal efforts in the northern district of Jaffna and in the east. (Note: The north/east bears the brunt of the landmine/UXO problem in Sri Lanka, with UNDP estimates of roughly one million landmines and thousands of tons of UXO present.)

¶14. (U) The RONCO team consists of six personnel -- four Americans, one Canadian, and one Swede -- who will train the Sri Lanka Army in all areas of humanitarian demining, including emergency medical training for demining-linked injuries. RONCO chief of party Fredrik Palsson told poloff on August 21 that cooperation with the SLA for the demining training has been overwhelmingly positive thus far. He added that the team was pleased with the facilities provided by the SLA in Embilipitiya, a rural area in Sri Lanka's deep south. Stressing the high level of professionalism in the SLA honed after years of war, Palsson predicted that training would proceed at a more advanced level than in other countries where RONCO had worked in the past.

¶15. (U) The project has already received outstanding press coverage. The August 22 signing of the U.S.-GSL Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the project by Charge' Entwistle and Defense Secretary Austin Fernando received enormous play in English-, Sinhala-, and Tamil-language newspapers. (Note: The MoU is contained in Ref A.) Front-page coverage was the norm. Television and radio coverage was also robust, with state-owned and independent broadcasters featuring the story in their August 22 news broadcasts.

¶16. (SBU) COMMENT: Given the extent of the landmine/UXO problem, humanitarian demining is a key issue in Sri Lanka, especially as more and more displaced persons attempt to return to their points of origin in war-torn areas. As reviewed in Mission's humanitarian demining country plan for Sri Lanka (see Ref B), U.S. demining assistance reinforces our strong support for the peace process. The Embilipitiya project follows up on two USG-sponsored quick reaction (QRDF) teams, which demined in Jaffna to rave reviews in 2002/03. It is positive that the training project is taking place in the south, as it highlights that U.S. assistance efforts are national in scope. The ultimate impact of the project, however, will be where it is most needed, i.e., the war-torn north/east. END COMMENT.

¶17. (U) Minimize considered.

ENTWISTLE